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ABSTRACT

Chaim Perelman, in "The New Rhetoric," discusses a paradigm for understanding how study of composition can be altered by knowledge of thought processes gained by cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists. He describes this rhetoric as "rhetorical rationalism" that recognizes a multiplicity of ways of being reasonable and recognizes that the goal of rhetoric is to "elaborate principles of being, thought, and action that are humanly reasonable." However, it is necessary to leave room for future modification, recognizing that values play an important part in decisions and introduce an arbitrary element in any decision. He creates a useful heuristic for the composition class: philosophical pairs (evoked simultaneously but not necessarily opposites) that can be used by students to determine the most effective approach to a topic. Such pairs include means/ends, multiplicity/unity, and letter/spirit; they generate a structure and a vocabulary which become an essential part of the argument. The use of these pairs in composition classes helps students suspend judgment and gives them a procedure which brings out the uniqueness of what they are writing about. (TJ)

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The Phaedrus, Perelman, and the Groundwork for a Theory of Composition

When the Renaissance turned from a theocentric view of the world to a material one, it gave us a foundation of perceptual thought that proved to be adequate until the end of the nineteenth century. If the word coming from all disciplines--philosophy, psychology, sociology, linguistics, art history--can be believed, we are in the midst of another revolution in perception, a turning toward subjectivity and an understanding of the innate organizational patterns of mind. This revolution promises to be as exciting as that of the Renaissance, and those of us in its midst proceed with exuberance, knowing our conceptions may be misconceptions, but rejoicing nonetheless in what we perceive as productive stumbling. Composition too has been reached by this Renaissance, though we are still on the perimeters of understanding how our work can be altered by knowledge of thought processes gained by cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists. And often those of us in the classroom find ourselves straddling a wide ditch between the inventive processes of rhetoric as a search for truth (processes described by Wayne Booth and by Richard Weaver) and the mandatory use of cavemen texts that deal not at all with these processes. Because of democratic textbook choice procedures, I found myself required this year to cover chapters in a textbook that still recommends

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making a desperate thesis just to get into the arena!

It did not take long to discover that I would have to find a paradigm for exploratory, persuasive, and its subdivision, argumentative writing, that would reflect the side of the ditch I hoped my students and I would end up on. Chaim Perelman's The New Rhetoric[1] accomplishes a remarkable linking of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions and provides that paradigm I needed.

Another delight of the revolution is that we have finally realized that we need not look upon the present as a corruption of the past, a past to which we must return. Instead, we look to the past for what is useful there in syncretizing the present, recognizing that our efforts to syncretize in the spirit of our age will pass into a different future. In that spirit I began this investigation into what is useful in Perelman's work for composition with the Phaedrus because we are just now beginning to read it intelligently and because it provides a starting point for rhetoric often neglected, not fully explored as a system, but for our present world often infinitely more useful than that of Aristotle, and finally because the work of Perelman lays a groundwork for a theory of composition based upon that starting point.

Otis M. Walter gives us an intelligent reading of the Phaedrus in his essay, "On Views of Rhetoric: Whether

Conservative or Progressive,"[2] in which he describes the Phaedrus as a starting point of a metaphysical rhetorical system. Rather than relying on the information given in the parts that concern rhetoric per se, Walter views the structure of the Phaedrus as an illustration of a right rhetoric, the possibility of which Plato never denied. The three parts of the dialogue are an illustration of a search for a definition of love that can be part of the World of Ideas, knowledge that never gets out of date. In the first speech by Lysias, love is never defined, and the speech can only deal with the earthly imitations of love. The second speech, given by Socrates, defines love and excels in its perception of the metaphysical Idea. But even Socrates can improve his definition, and this is illustrated by his willingness to redefine love in the third speech as a supreme good which is capable of inspiration and creation. This definition in turn generates a speech that is capable of transforming. The search for knowledge that never gets out of date held the generative power of classical rhetoric.

This same generative power creates a rhetorical system in The New Rhetoric, as Perelman lays the groundwork for a theory of rhetoric that grows out of a search for lasting knowledge. Perelman describes this as a "rhetorical rationalism"--that recognizes that there is a multiplicity of ways of being reasonable and that the goal of rhetoric is to "elaborate principles of being, thought, and action that are

humanly reasonable,"[3] but always making provision for future modification of universal immutable truths in the same way that Socrates was able to modify his definition of love as his perceptions grew in the process of rhetorical discovery.

This reason that Perelman describes "deliberates, argues, justifies, gives reason for or against," but always recognizes that values play a part in any decision--a part as important as facts and presumptions, and therefore there is an arbitrary element in any decision. An example of the kind of definition which seems humanly reasonable, but which allows for future modification is Perelman's definition of justice: "a principle of action in accordance with which beings of one and the same essential category must be treated in the same way."[4]

Perelman provides the best definition that I know of the universal audience, that elusive entity that we all try to help our students come to understand. For Perelman, there is a real distinction between persuading and convincing. If the speaker is concerned with persuasion, he must find the means to persuade a particular audience. Convincing goes beyond that to deal with the adherence of every rational being. All a speaker can do to convince is to think that he is validly addressing an audience of rational beings. Since each individual, each culture has its own conception of the universal audience, we constitute the universal audience from what we know of our fellow men, transcending

the oppositions of which we are aware and assuming that all who understand the reasons will have to accept the conclusion, and that's the best we can do.

Perelman sees asscciation and dissociation constantly at work at the same time in our thoughts. He asserts, "All systematic thinking tries to relate elements which, in an undeveloped thought, are just so many isolated pairs."[5] For the associative act, Perelman provides a set of topics, Aristotelian in nature that simply repeat those we have been concerned with in the past in the composition class: genus-definition, consequence, likeness-difference, example, illustration, metaphor, and so on.

It is Perelman's work with the dissociative act that provides the most useful new heuristic for the composition class. His philosophical pairs provide the composition teacher with a set of commonplaces that can be used by the student in placing an undeveloped thought along a continuum and in developing in his reading an understanding of the validity of a piece of persuasive prose. Dissociation establishes hierarchies for which the speaker or writer provides criteria. As Perelman describes the process, "the thinker creates new dissociations or declines to admit certain of his predecessor's dissociations."[6] The evocation of philosophical pairs generates the line of thought for the writer which would prove fruitful because of the natural manner in which the pairs fit the object and serve as a

normal consequence of a situation in a way that the adoption of rules or techniques cannot.

In my classroom when we began work with persuasion and argumentation, I talked to students about the concept of Perelman's rhetoric, extended by Burke's concept of identification, that we would be working with facts, presumptions, values in seeking an "intellectual domination of the environment" in the process of writing. Our concern would not be with overwhelming the opposition, the concern of our text, or with imagery that evoked the Christians versus the lions. (After reading an assignment in the text, one of my students said that she felt as if she were going to war.) Instead our concern would be with establishing reasonable principles of being, thought, and action, but always recognizing the arbitrary element of values that is there. I then gave them a list of the philosophical pairs that Perelman says are most characteristic of philosophical inquiry, stressing that these pairs are evoked simultaneously in thought but are not necessarily opposites. These pairs are means/ends, consequence/ fact, act/person, accident/essence, occasion/ cause, relative/ absolute, subjective/ objective, multiplicity/ unity, normal/ standard, individual/ universal, particular/ general, theory/ practice, language/ thought and letter/ spirit.

To determine whether or not these are the valid philosophical pairs for western thought, the students then considered a list that I gave them of quotations and maxims gathered

at random to see if the pairs were at work in those maxims and proverbs. Let me give you a few examples. "Actions speak louder than words." Students identified at work here ~~were~~ name/thing, abstract/ concrete, theory/ practice, symbol/thing and verbal/real.

"We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done." Longfellow. The pairs identified were act/person, appearance/ reality, abstract/concrete.

"All authority belongs to the people." Jefferson. Here they recognized letter/spirit, individual/universal plurality/unity.

"I must be cruel, only to be kind." Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act III, Sc. 4. The students identified means/end, consequence/ fact.

As a second step I gave the students a paragraph from a professional argument to determine what pairs were at work in the argument. I chose a paragraph from Paul R. Ehrlich and John P. Holdren's "Abortion and Morality," (Saturday Review, Sept. 4, 1971), p. 58) because it is a subject so often attempted in an abortive way by students left on their own to choose a topic for a persuasive paper. Students examined the paragraph and determined that the argument included the pairs: abstract/concrete, sensible knowledge/ rational knowledge, theory/practice, means/ends, consequence/ fact, real/ideal and letter/spirit.

As a final step in this procedure, and because we had been discussing students' right to their own language, I posed the question, "Should a prestigious dialect be taught in the schools?" In the discussion that followed, students expressed opinions ranging all the way from "eradicationist" to "legitimizer," to borrow Geneva Smitherman's terms. Then I asked the question, what pairs of philosophical realities would a good argument concerning the question of dialects and schools have to include. Students decided that the following pairs would have to be considered: normal/standard, letter/spirit, individual/universal, language/thought, means/end, and multiplicity/unity. The students were then asked to write a short essay answering the question and making use of the pairs to determine the most effective approaches. I was pleased with the results, but I was also impressed by the fact that the pairs seemed to generate vocabulary. Often the words of the pairs themselves became an essential part of the thesis of the argument.

We are being taught that our perceptions form the constructs of our world. Phenomenologists have taught us that first come our perceptions, second the conceptual act, and that the physical product never wholly subsumes that act. The act of speaking, more especially the act of writing, is of necessity reductive. In a world that has been described

by Richard Weaver as "centrifugal and infinite," the rhetoric of dichotomies which we have taught in the past, a rhetoric that calls for making a desperate thesis and then defending it, is not enough. Apparently it was not enough for Plato's world either. The consideration of Perelman's philosophical pairs asks students to suspend judgments and gives students a heuristic procedure that brings out the uniqueness of what they are writing about. It contains an inherent linear continuum that will make it possible for students to rank the qualities of a unique world. I hope that Socrates and Perelman will soon teach those who write the texts that "if the way around is long, do not marvel; for, when the ends are great, the circuit must be trod."[8]

Notes

[1]Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969).

[2]Otis M. Walter, "On Views of Rhetoric, Whether Conservative or Progressive," in Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric: Selected Readings, ed. Richard L. Johannesen (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 18.

[3]Perelman, "On Self-Evidence in Metaphysics," International Philosophical Quarterly, IV (Feb., 1964), 5-6.

[4]Perelman, The New Rhetoric, p. 219.

[5]Perelman, p. 420.

[6]Perelman, p. 421.

[7]Plato's Phaedrus, Lane Cooper, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 64.